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Vulture volunteers in Kwenia engage community members in looking out for vulture nesting sites.

Engaging local communities to conserve the Kwenia cliffs vulture breeding sites

Text and photo by Vincent Otieno

In the semi-arid landscape of Kajiado County, about 95 km south of Nairobi, lies Kwenia: a place of 'massive cliffs and intimidating valleys'. Besides their alluring scenery and hiking appeal, the cliffs of Kwenia play a crucial role in keeping one of Africa's most threatened birds alive. The Critically Endangered Rüppell's Vultures breed in these cliffs.

"These cliffs are important to vultures and other birds of prey," says Jackson William from Kilonito, who is familiar with the cliffs and appreciates their role in vulture conservation.

William is one of the two community members Nature Kenya is engaging to enhance vulture conservation efforts in the Kwenia Important Bird Area (IBA). These community members, referred to as vulture volunteers, assist in collecting information on vulture sightings, breeding and nesting and wildlife poisoning.

"Working closely with communities at key vulture sites like Kwenia, one of the nesting sites for Rüppell's Vultures, is critical to our conservation work. The communities are better placed to relay first-hand information on vultures given that they live there," says Paul Gacheru, the Nature Kenya Species and Sites manager. Data gathered from vulture volunteers is used to inform future conservation actions, adds Gacheru.

In July, William and the other Kwenia community members were taken through a four-day exercise to induct them into site monitoring activities which was organized by Nature Kenya. During the four days, this team traveled through Kwenia IBA and identified eight potential places for future monitoring. These were Empalulu, Igulukotk Naiboro, Kwenia, Kilonito, Inaudat, Paranae and Singerine cliffs. Rüppell's and Egyptian vultures and other birds of prey, including Martial and Verreaux's eagles, were sighted in some areas.

Vulture were observed perched and flying above three cliffs: Empalulu, Kwenia and Kilonito. Kwenia Cliff had the highest number of Rüppell's Vultures recorded. Little vulture activity was observed in Paranae and Igulukotk Naiboro cliffs, though they exhibited potential for roosting and breeding for Rüppell's Vultures.

William's knowledge of the Kwenia terrain came in handy in directing the team to potential vulture nesting and roosting sites. Jackson also took time to explain the importance of conserving vultures and the threats facing them to Maasai herders that the team encountered along the way.

"It is important to educate the community about vultures, especially here in Kwenia where they breed. This area is a good habitat for vultures. I am happy to be part of the positive change Nature Kenya is bringing to this area to save these special birds," says William.

Nature Kenya is engaging 65 vulture volunteers in Kwenia, Amboseli, Mosiro and Maasai Mara landscapes in Kajiado and Narok counties. The vulture volunteers have been trained and equipped with binoculars and smart phones to gather vulture-related information. These individuals also conduct anti-wildlife poisoning awareness creation activities at their sites. Poisoning of carnivores after an attack on livestock has been singled out as the main cause of vulture deaths in Kenya, with six out of eight species found here facing extinction.

Understanding Key Biodiversity Areas

By Joshua Sese

Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) are sites of global biodiversity conservation importance identified using internationally agreed, objective, quantitative and scientifically defensible criteria adopted in 2016. These sites significantly contribute to the survival of global biodiversity.

KBAs include terrestrial, fresh water and marine water habitats, ranging from rainforests to reefs, mountains to marshes, deserts to grasslands and the deepest ocean floors. KBAs are crucial tools for guiding decisions on conservation and sustainable management as they ensure that efforts are focused on places likely to have the greatest conservation impact.

Governments may use KBA data during planning for development projects to avoid damaging ecologically-sensitive areas. The KBA designation promotes site-based conservation efforts and seeks to ensures that nature's most fragile habitats are given precedence.

Globally, more than 16,356 KBAs have been identified, with 43 percent occurring in protected and conserved areas. Nature Kenya and partners have identified 67 KBAs in Kenya, so far based on Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Thirty of these KBAs are protected (gazetted forests, national parks and reserves). The remaining 37 lack formal protection. A fraction of these sites is under private ownership and community management.

Identification and designation of IBAs relied entirely on bird data. The 2016 shift of focus from IBAs to KBAs broadened the scope to include other taxonomic groups in identifying sites deemed important to biodiversity.

Cont. in pg. 2

Understanding Key Biodiversity Areas

Cont. from pg. 1

All IBAs are KBAs, but some KBAs are not IBAs (i.e. they are significant for the conservation of other taxa, but not birds). Nonetheless, the IBA network has proved to be a good approximation to the overall network of KBAs, as it includes the bulk of other target species and the most significant sites.

Birds have unique characteristics that make them an easy target taxonomic group. Birds are common, occur in most of the habitats in Kenya, are diverse and easy to identify compared to other taxonomic groups. They are relatively large, conspicuous, easy to observe, appealing and well-studied. IBAs therefore offer an excellent starting point for immediate conservation action, as the addition of other sites to complete the KBA network progresses with data made available.

KBAs need to be prioritized for nature to continue to thrive. Appropriate identification, correct documentation, effective management, sufficient resourcing and adequate safeguarding of KBAs present the best option of preventing biodiversity loss and extinction of species. Realization of the KBA dream, however, requires a combined effort.

We call upon taxon experts from government and non-governmental organizations, individuals, groups, societies and volunteers from all walks of life to support the KBA initiative in whichever way possible. Do you know a site with viable populations of unique and threatened species? Please send detailed information to **CPO2@naturekenya.org** and we will work together to see if it qualifies as a new KBA.

Bioblitz in Gigiri

Last month, Nature Kenya, in partnership with the Embassy of Sweden, conducted a 'bioblitz' biodiversity survey at the Swedish Ambassador's residence in Gigiri, Nairobi. A bioblitz is an event that focuses on finding, identifying and documenting as many species as possible in a specific area within a short period of time.

A team of experts from Nature Kenya, National Museums of Kenya and the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE) engaged 43 Kenyan and Swedish students to find, identify and document birds, insects, plants, reptiles and amphibians at the residence. Among the day's highlights were the discovery of an African Fish Eagle nest and crayfish within the compound.

Damselfly

Striped Grass Mouse.

Students learn how to identify an Abyssinian Thrush.

Malachite Kingfisher

A butterfly on a flower.

Conservation Briefs

Fleur awarded by Birdlife International

Fleur Ng'weno, the Honorary Secretary of the East Africa Natural History Society (Nature Kenya) received a Conservation Achievement Award from BirdLife International at its World Congress last month. The award honoured the weekly Wednesday Morning Birdwalks, started in 1971, and monitoring birds with Dakatcha Woodland Conservation Group, which led to finding the breeding site of Clarke's (Kilifi) Weaver in 2013.

New Nature Kenya committee

We are happy to announce a new Nature Kenya working group - the **Ethnoconservation Committee**. Ethnoconservation is an approach to preserving biodiversity heritage through utilization of indigenous knowledge systems. The new committee will conduct research in ethnoconservation efforts in Kenya among other objectives. Members are encouraged to join the committee. For more detail send an email to office@naturekenya.org.

For updates visit
www.naturekenya.org

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Flying trash or extraordinary bird?

By Richard Kipngeno

After days of overcast skies in Nairobi, no one anticipated our Sunday birdwatch on 21st August, 2022 at Ngong Road Forest Sanctuary would deliver great sightings.

By 7:30 am, we had already checked in at the sanctuary. Unlike the previous few days, the sun had risen unhindered by clouds. At the sanctuary, we met Nicholas Akach, a ranger and fellow birder, who briefed us on his recent sightings in the forest. They included a white morph African Paradise Flycatcher and a White-crested Helmetshrike: an exciting line-up to inspire our birding day.

A few meters from the car park along the Commonwealth Cemetery fence, one of our participants spotted an all-white flamboyant-looking bird. As she was describing the bird to us, a white morph African Paradise Flycatcher flew past in pursuit of what appeared to be a butterfly. The flycatcher's long dangling white tail attracted everyone's attention.

Our list grew as birds came out in numbers to take advantage of the morning warmth. In the list were Kikuyu (Montane) White-eye, Chinspot Batis, Yellow-whiskered Greenbul, Cabanis's Greenbul, Yellow-throated Longclaw, Three-banded Plover and others. One elusive forest specialist, the Narina Trogon, was missing, but we remained optimistic.

We manoeuvred through the forest, occasionally bending to avoid low-hanging climbers and branches. Some team members walked along the forest edge. Ooops!... Something must have been startled from high grass on the ground. It flew up and down again. Was it a bird?... a tattered trash?... No one could tell since it dragged long strap-like attachments.

We scanned through where the unusual 'thing' landed. Under the bush lay a bird facing us. It was a nightjar! But which one? As we debated, the bird decided to 'clear' our doubts! It flew out, displaying its extraordinary long wing-projections, affirming its identity as a Pennant-winged Nightjar. The bird kept dodging our camera lenses while in flight. Eventually, Matthew McIlvenna managed to get a clear shot of it on the ground. It was an incredible sighting!

Nightjars are active from dusk all through the night to dawn. They spend their entire day hiding on the ground, some up on trees. Pennant-winged Nightjars breed in southern Africa, from southern Tanzania. They spend the non-breeding season to the north of us, and are occasionally seen on their way south to their breeding grounds in August.

It was a great bird walk, having bagged 48 species in our list, including the unexpected and extraordinary nightjar.

Photo by Matthew McIlvenna

October stars and galaxies

By Fleur Ng'weno

Look high overhead, a little to the north, for the bright star Altair, flanked by two fainter stars. In the north below Altair, about halfway up from the horizon, are bright Deneb and brilliant Vega. These three stars – Altair, Deneb and Vega – form a giant triangle. Deneb is also the tail of the constellation Cygnus the flying swan. Three stars form the body and wings of the swan. Three other stars, less bright, form the long neck, stretching upwards into the triangle.

Further east is another geometric shape, a giant square with one bright star at each corner. This is the constellation of Pegasus, the flying horse of ancient Greek myths. Below Pegasus and to the left, low in the north, stars form the shape of a letter "M" – the constellation Cassiopeia. On the other side of Pegasus, high in the southeast, is the bright star Fomalhaut. The star Achernar, even brighter, is rising in the southeast.

Our sun and all the stars we can see with our eyes alone are part of the Milky Way galaxy. A galaxy is a huge star system. From Earth, the Milky Way looks like a long narrow cloud across the sky; with binoculars we can see it is made up of millions of stars. This pale ribbon of stars stretches from the constellations of Scorpius and Sagittarius in the southwest to the stars Altair and Deneb in the north and the constellation Cassiopeia in the northeast.

On October and November evenings here near the equator, we can see three other galaxies. To see them, you need a clear, dark night, away from city lights and without a bright moon. Your own eyes are enough, but binoculars are helpful.

Look carefully between the great square of Pegasus high in the east and the M of Cassiopeia below it in the north. Do you see a blurred, hazy spot of light? This is the Great Spiral Nebula M31 in the constellation of Andromeda. If possible, view it with binoculars or a telescope. The Andromeda Nebula is a galaxy of millions and millions of stars.

To see the other two galaxies, choose a place with a good view of the southern sky (and a clear, dark night). Look south (left of the sunset) and further southeast, below the bright star Achernar. You may see two pale areas, like small round clouds, low over the southern horizon. These are the Small and Large Magellanic Clouds. They are small galaxies, composed of millions of stars – the nearest galaxies to us, apart from our own Milky Way.

Planets, Oct '22

Jupiter is brilliant all night, fully lit by the sun, and its orbit bringing it closer to earth than usual in late September and early October. Saturn, less bright, is high in the east in the early evening. Mars, the "red planet" rises in the east during the evening and is high in the west at dawn. The gibbous moon appears near Saturn on Oct 5, near Jupiter on the 8th and near Mars on the 14th and 15th.

Mercury, small but bright, is low in the eastern sky before dawn in the first half of October, later sinking into the sunrise.

Moon, Oct '22

Oct 3, first quarter. Oct 9, Full moon. Oct 17, Last quarter, Oct 25, new moon, near the star Antares on the 28th.

October Sun

In Kenya in October, the sun rises and sets earlier each day. By month's end the sunrise in Nairobi is at 6:11 am, and the sunset at 6:21 pm.

Meteors

At times the Earth travels through areas of dust in space, left from the passage of comets. When these particles fall into the Earth's atmosphere, they burn up, shining briefly for a moment. Look out for such meteors during the Orionids Meteor Shower, Oct 2-Nov 7, especially on Oct 22 between midnight and dawn.

Birding Updates

Wednesday Morning Birdwalks in Nairobi

Please observe Covid-19 protocols as needed: wear or bring masks and meet at designated venues.

5th October – Ondiri Swamp, Kikuyu. Meet at 8:30 am at the Ondiri Wetland Information Centre. Directions: Coming from the city centre, take Waiyaki Way towards Kikuyu. Turn left at Gitaru onto Southern Bypass. Slip left onto Kikuyu overpass. Take first left turn at overpass and drive straight to the Information Centre. Ondiri Swamp is the only quaking bog in Kenya, a presumed source of the Nairobi River.

12th October – Nairobi Arboretum. Meet at 8:30 am at the main entrance off State House Road. There is an entrance fee of Ksh. 65 per person payable via Mpesa.

19th October – Museum Grounds/ Michuki Memorial Park. Meet at 8 am in the open space in front of the entrance to the museum galleries.

26th October – City Park. Meet at 8.30 am at the parking near the Coca Cola Kiosk. Directons: Coming from the City centre, take Limuru Road past Aga Khan Hospital. Make a U-turn at Total Energies Petrol Station, Limuru Road. Drive back along Limuru Road and turn left onto City Park Road next to City Park Market.

16th October. Sunday Bird Watch – Thika Sewage Treatment Works. Meet at 8.30 am at the Sewage Works gate. Directions: Driving along Garissa Road, turn right at BAT. Turn left at the T-junction, turn right where the tarmac ends. Turn left at Full Gospel Church Sign post (Opposite P.C.E.A), turn left at Kiganjo Primary School gate. Take the first right turn and drive ahead to the Sewage Works gate.

If you have questions, please write < news@naturekenya.org> or phone 0780-149200.

In order to coordinate the birding effort in Kenya, if you plan to take part on 8th October, 2022, please send your name, contacts and birding location to Richard Kipngeno at <news@naturekenya.org> or to Pete Steward on WhatsApp +44 7473 957279.

Bird Ringing at Nairobi National Museum grounds usually take place on Tuesday mornings. Please confirm with Titus Imboma <Imbomati911@gmail.com> Phone 0721-649452.

Thursday Birdwalks in Malindi

6th October – Moi Village and Bridge. Meet at 4:00 pm at Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Membership Office.

13th October – Mtangani via Light Academy. Meet at 4:00 pm at the Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Office.

20th October – Malindi Harbour. Meet at 8:00 am at Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Membership Office. **NOTE: this is a morning outing.**

27th October – Ganda. Meet at 3:30 pm at the Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya Office. **NOTE: meet at 3:30 pm**

29th October. Saturday Birdwatch - Nature Kenya Reserve Kibaoni near Marafa. Meet at Malindi Museum near Nature Kenya office at 6:00am

For more information, email: <malindimembers@naturekenya.org > or phone 0725 223042.

Mombasa Birdwalks are held the 3rd Saturday of each month. To check meeting time and place, check Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/FFJmombasa/>

Or contact: Taibali Hamzali <thamzali@gmail.com> / 0733-980540 or Kelvin Mazera <klvnrua@yahoo.com> / 0720-928783

Tree Planting

By Nature Kenya Youth Committee

Alliance High School, Kikuyu
15th October, 2022

Yes! Start my **Nature**Kenya membership

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For details on associated groups such as Youth Committee, Succulenta, and Friends of Nairobi Arboretum, City Park or Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, contact office@naturekenya.org